

## Second Chance by the Sea by darthstormer

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**Summary:** The first time she went away, it had almost killed him. The second time was even worse. After El and Hopper have to go on the run, will Mike ever get a second chance at life with the girl he loves? Post S2

## 1. Chapter 1

The first time she went away, it had almost killed him. The second time was even worse.

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Mike Wheeler could remember every detail of that terrible afternoon in late February, 1985. He had just gotten home from school and was settling in to start on his homework, anxious to get it over with so he could call El after dinner. As he sat down at his desk, he reached over and flipped on his SuperComm in case the guys had questions on their own work, or one of them just needed a break. Immediately, a familiar voice crackled over the speaker.

"Wheeler? If you're there, pick up."

The frantic voice of Chief Hopper repeated his call as Mike reached for the radio. Behind his voice, Mike could make out the distinct whine of the Blazer's engine being pushed to its limit.

"I'm here, what's wrong?" he answered, knowing that if the Chief was reaching out to him like that, it couldn't be anything good.

"Are you at home?" Hopper asked.

"Yeah, I just got home. What's going on?" Mike repeated.

Ignoring the question, Hopper plowed on. "I'll be there in about a minute. Meet me out front. If you're not there, I've got to keep going."

Not bothering to respond, Mike dropped the radio and sprinted out of his room and down the stairs. At the front door he stopped long enough to grab a coat and to snatch his shoes up off the floor where he kicked them off just minutes before. Sensing the Chief was serious about not waiting for him, Mike dashed out the front door with shoes in hand, knowing he could put them on once was in the truck. His socks were quickly soaked as he ran across the recently fallen snow covering the front yard, but his mind was gripped by raw panic and he barely noticed the cold.

From down the block, Mike picked up on the sound of the Blazer revving hard as it rounded the corner. Moments later, the truck slammed to a stop where Mike was standing and he quickly climbed in. Before Mike could even finish slamming the door shut, Hopper was off again, kicking up a spray of muddy slush in the vehicle's wake. Looking over at the Chief, Mike was startled to realize how ashen-white his face was. With the steering-wheel gripped tight in one hand, he held the radio's microphone in the other, tapping out a frantic message. While Mike wasn't quite as proficient as Will when it came to Morse code, he picked out enough words to get a sense of what was happening, and his heart began to sink.

*TIME TO GO*

*DRESS WARM*

*REMEMBER THE PLAN*

*MIKE HERE*

When he finally stopped tapping out his message, they rode in silence for almost a minute before her response beeped over the radio:

*OK*

Only when Hopper had hung up the handset did Mike finally speak. "What happened?"

"Dr. Owens called about ten minutes ago. He's been keeping an ear to the ground since the lab closed, trying to figure out if we're in the clear. He's just gotten word from one of his sources that Brenner's second-in-command has figured out El's still alive, that she's still here in town, and that he's put together a crew to try and recover her. Owens thinks we have less than a day to clear out. I don't plan to take that long."

"So where are we going to go?" Mike asked, terrified he was not part of the Chief's plans but trying to hold onto a shred of hope. The pained, apologetic look Hopper gave him was all it took to destroy him completely.

"I can't lose her again," Mike choked out as hot tears broke free from

his eyes and ran unheeded down his cheeks.

"I know kid," he said softly. "And I'm sorry. If there was any other way, I would. Owens is already pulling the birth certificate he crafted for her back out of the system, so I think I can make the two of us disappear. I don't know how to get you out too. And you have your family here still, I can't take you away from them."

Mike had known for a long time this was a possibility, and he believed Hopper when he said there was no other way, but it didn't make the situation any less heartbreaking. For the rest of the drive out to the cabin, where he had been desperately trying to keep her safe, the only sound to be heard was the whine of the engine as they plowed through the chunky slush covering the road.

As Hopper pulled to a stop where the road dead-ended at a fallen tree, Mike saw El standing there waiting with two black duffel bags and a backpack over one shoulder. It was clear they had planned out this routine well in advance, just in case they had to drop everything and run someday. Her face was nearly hidden by the thick hood of her coat but Mike could still see her own face was raw and wet with tears to match his own. While Hopper jumped out to take the bags from her and toss them into the back of the Blazer, Mike scrambled into the backseat where he knew she would join him.

Climbing in next to Mike, El threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. Pulling her into a tight hug, Mike couldn't seem to find his voice, despite knowing he only had a few minutes to say all the things he had hoped he would have a lifetime to tell her. Instead, they held tight to one another, soaking each-other's shoulders as Hopper turned the Blazer around and drove back up to the main road.

Pulling to a stop, Hopper looked in the rear-view mirror at the pair in the backseat and felt his own heart breaking at the thought of having to separate the two of them. Still, he knew above all else, he had to keep her safe, even if that meant tearing her away from the life she knew.

"Alright, this is it you guys. You need to say your goodbyes." Hopper said quietly. "We've got to get going."

Pulling apart, they stared deep into each-other's eyes for a long time, unsure of just what to say. Finally, knowing no words could adequately sum up everything he wanted to tell her, Mike leaned in and pressed his lips gently to hers. Fighting to keep from breaking down entirely, El leaned into the kiss and pulled him tight. Finally pulling apart, Mike tried desperately to put right what he knew could be his final words to her.

"This isn't goodbye forever, just goodbye for now. I will find you again someday." he said, holding her hands tight in his own. "I love you, El."

Giving his hands a squeeze, she forced a smile to her lips, fighting the pain in her chest. "I love you, Mike."

With that, Mike climbed out of the Blazer, turning to address Hopper as he stepped into the ankle-deep snow on the side of the road.

"Keep her safe. Whatever you do, take care of her."

"I will," Hopper vowed. "I promise."

With that, Hopper put the Blazer in gear again and started down the road out of Hawkins. All Mike could do was stand there and watch as the tail-lights grew smaller in the distance. When the truck finally turned the corner and vanished from sight, Mike turned around and started walking toward home, breaking down sobbing as he did so. He never was quite sure how he made it home that night; several times he remembered laying down in the snow and willing the world to simply swallow him up.

That had been twelve years ago now, but the pain of that afternoon burned as fresh in Mike Wheeler's mind as the day it happened. For a few years, postcards had come in from all across the country, first in Hopper's handwriting and later, in El's own hand as she caught up on missed years of schooling. They came from cities big and small, and alternated between both coasts, as well as states in-between. Mike was certain Hopper was sending them as they passed through, or sent them through an intermediary who would pass them along; anything to hide where they really were living. The messages were always similar, expressing how much she missed him and assurances they

were still safe.

Eventually, the postcards stopped too, though Mike was certain they were alright. He hoped the silence meant they had found someplace to settle down and build a new life for themselves. Mike never forgot Eleven and promised himself he would see her again someday. Every time business brought him to a new city, he kept a keen eye open for some familiar sign in the faces he passed. The thought passed through his mind once more as he drove out of the rental car lot at Sea-Tac International airport in Seattle, Washington and headed out toward the coast on his latest sales call.

## 2. Chapter 2

After she was torn so abruptly from his life, Mike had found himself slipping into the hopeless despair that had almost destroyed him the year she was missing. This time around, he found he was able to pull himself out of the downward spiral by reminding himself that, unlike last time, he knew she was still out there. She was safe in hiding, and he knew Hopper would do absolutely anything to keep her from harm. While he still hung out with the guys most weekends through High School, he poured himself more and more into his studies and secret dreams of how he might find her again someday.

In college, he had spent the first semester taking the introductory courses for his intended major of accounting, bored out of his mind. While others in his classes struggled with the basic concepts the professor was covering, everything just clicked for Mike and most days he had already completed that day's homework before class was even done. Meanwhile, he spent most nights grilling his roommate Craig, a computer science major, on what new topics they had covered that day. He found the rapidly emerging field fascinating and full of possibilities. Finally, just before they headed their separate ways for Thanksgiving, Craig had given him the piece of advice he needed to hear to set himself on the right direction in life.

"Look, your miserable doing accounting classes and you clearly have a knack for this computer stuff. I've caught you more than once trying out my homework just for fun, nerd," he said, good-naturally. "Why don't you give the CS program a try next semester. If you really miss accounting, you could always slip a class or two in there just for the sadistic fun of it."

In the end, he had taken Craig's advice and never looked back. He had taken to computers like a fish to water and by senior year, he and Craig had partnered up on a side project and sold their software back to the college for use in their administration offices. A couple small projects propelled them further until they struck big with their latest venture. While all the big-chains were already switching over to computer-based reservation systems, there were still thousands of small-town hotels and motels still working out of thick, dusty

registers. Mike and Craig had put together a package deal of hardware and software to help bring these mom-and-pop establishments into the 21st century and onto the new frontier of the World Wide Web. Of course, this usually meant traveling to small towns all across the country to visit these hotels and make the sales pitch.

Mike had been only too happy to put on the traveling-salesman hat and go on the calls himself. He knew the system inside and out and found he was actually pretty good closing sales with customers who still regarded computers as some kind of black magic, best kept at a safe distance. He had another reason for volunteering to take on the lion-share of the trips as well. He had spent years trying to picture just where Hopper would have taken El to hide away and start a new life. Mike just couldn't picture Hopper opting for a big city with thousands of inquiring eyes passing by on the street. While small towns were notorious for their gossips, anxious to know every last detail of peoples lives, it was also easy to spot outsiders taking too much interest in someone. If he had to put money on it, Mike could best picture them settling into a little town with a carefully rehearsed back-story and falling quickly into a routine that would hold them over until it was safe.

Each new town he came to, Mike tried to get out and about as much as possible and visit the places the locals tended to congregate: cafés, grocery stores, dusty bars far from tourists; the kind of place he might run into either of them by chance. He casually scanned faces for features he might recognize. He was certain he could still pick Hopper out of a crowd; the Chief's face burned hard in his memory. El would be harder to recognize as she undoubtedly changed a lot in the last twelve years, and he did his best to picture what she would look like at 26.

Mike decided he liked Clear Brook the second he turned off the highway and started down the town's only major street. It was a small fishing town right on the Pacific Ocean, with a small harbor protected by a jetty, right where a river met the sea. A couple hundred residents, two gas stations and a single grocery store, the quiet town was worlds away from the bustle of Chicago. Still, being situated a reasonable three hour drive outside Seattle, two hotels



welcomed year-round guests to Clear Brook. He had tried to arrange demonstrations at both of them, but only the Pacific View Inn had been interested. Still, if he could close that sale, the other would probably come calling within the next year, doing their best to keep up with the Jones', as it were.

Needing a little getaway of his own, Mike had actually arranged to arrive two days early for his meeting with the couple who ran the Pacific View. He intended to spend some relaxing time kicking off his shoes and walking barefoot on the beach, and maybe finally finishing the latest John Grisham novel he'd been packing around for almost three months now. And, of course, he would hit the local gathering places in his desperate search.

Realizing he still had a few hours to kill before the afternoon check-in at the hotel, and his stomach reminding him that his airline breakfast was long gone, Mike decided lunch was in order. At the end of the street, he found a little restaurant overlooking the harbor and its docks full of deep-sea trawlers and day-charters. The dusty gravel parking lot was mostly empty and he pulled his rental into a spot next to a dented old brown pickup with 'Walker Marine Engine Repair' hand-painted in neat, white lettering on the side. Stepping through the front door, he found the place was nearly deserted despite it being a few minutes before noon. Two men sat at the long counter, talking over coffee and burgers, and a third stood at the register paying for his meal. Based on the grease-stained jeans, faded Carhartt jacket and brown Stetson hat, Mike guessed that was probably the "Walker" that went with the truck outside.

Passing by the "Please Seat Yourself" sign, Mike headed to a corner booth overlooking the docks and the ocean beyond. Looking out at the slowly crashing waves, he breathed a contented sigh and thought, not for the first time, of leaving Chicago for good and settling someplace like this. From behind him, he heard the man at the register finish up paying and the waitress handing him back his change.

"Thanks for stopping by, Daddy," she said, cheerily. "Don't forget, I'm fixing meatloaf tonight so be home by six."

He told her he wouldn't forget, and headed out the door. She moved

quickly down to the two men at the counter and topped off their coffee.

"Anything else today?" she asked.

Mike missed what one of them responded, but she gave an exasperated laugh. "Bill, you know Dr. Smith said no more pie. I'm not even supposed to still let you order burgers, and I'm not about to get an earful the next time your cholesterol check comes back even higher."

Mike couldn't help but laugh to himself. This was exactly why he liked small towns, and he found himself missing Hawkins just a bit. While he still went home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, he stayed at his parents and did little around town; too many painful memories seemed to crop up everywhere he turned.

Finally done with the men at the counter, and still chuckling over Bill's request for the forbidden pie, the waitress made her way over to the booth to bring Mike a menu.

"Coffee?" she asked, setting the laminated lunch menu on the table in front of him.

"Please," he answered, looking up with a smile.

Their eyes met for only an instant before she turned and headed back to grab a mug for him, but it was enough to make Mike's heart skip a beat. Her face wasn't one he had seen before, but her deep brown eyes held a familiarity that took him back. When she returned to drop off the coffee and take his order, he tried to discretely study her face more closely for some recognizable features, or for her to show any spark of recognition of him.

"What'll you have?" she asked, setting down the mug and pulling a notepad out of the pocket of her apron.

Embarrassed, Mike realized he had been so lost in thought he hadn't even looked at the menu yet. Glancing down to the middle of the page, he blurted out the first words his eyes fell on. "Club sandwich," he said.

"Good choice, one of my favorites," she said with a smile, jotting down the order and heading back behind the counter to drop it off in the kitchen.

His mind was awash with competing thoughts of hopefulness and doubt. He watched her moving about the restaurant, clearing dishes and wiping down the counter when Bill and the other man left. Going back into the kitchen and talking to the cook, coming back out and refilling ketchup bottles. He did his best to be subtle and not stare; the last thing he wanted to do was get caught and creep her out. Her brown hair, pulled back in a ponytail, had just a little curl to it, the way he remembered El's just before they left. She had that same shy, sweet smile.

He quickly averted his eyes, pretending he hadn't been staring, when she came back out of the kitchen carrying the plate with his sandwich. As she set the dish down with her left hand, his eyes couldn't help but land on her left wrist. The chunky band of a watch, a green scrunchy and a blue hair-tie obscured the first few inches of her arm. "It could mean nothing, or it could mean everything," he thought to himself as she turned away with a smile.

With his heart pounding in his chest and a million thoughts in his head, Mike could hardly eat the sandwich sitting in front of him, despite being famished just minutes before. He was desperate to know, and yet afraid to find out. He had been wrong before, and embarrassed himself thoroughly more than a few times by asking women if they just happened to be his telekinetic childhood sweetheart who had to go on the run with her adoptive police-chief father when the government tried to hunt her down. He had phrased it a little better, but had come off looking just as crazy.

As he was nearing the end of his sandwich, the cook came out from the kitchen carrying a black trash-bag, headed for the dumpster. Just as he started out the front door, the phone back in the kitchen started to ring. He looked over his shoulder and addressed the girl behind the counter.

"Hey El, could you get that?"

Mike nearly choked on the bite he was chewing as his eyes snapped

up to watch her push through the swinging door back into the kitchen. His mind was made up, he had to say something. There were two possibilities; either he had finally found her, or the universe was playing some cruel trick. Either way, he had to know. A few minutes later, she came back out from the kitchen and, seeing he was done eating, she came over with the check. Although he had enough cash in his wallet, he quickly pulled the credit card out instead. He would put the ball in her court, handing her something with the name Michael Wheeler stamped in gold lettering right across the front.

As he handed the card over, he leaned closer and quietly asked "Eleven?"

Without a word, she made her way back to the register on the front counter. He was certain she had heard him; besides the cook back in the kitchen, they were the only two people in the whole place. A minute later, she walked back over to the table, not making eye contact as she did so. She set down his card, the receipt and a pen, and turned away, moving quickly back behind the counter and into the kitchen.

Mike was dumbfounded at the reaction. If he had been wrong, and she was just another random stranger who went by the name El, the phrase 'Eleven' would have just seemed confusing as opposed to something worrisome. Only after he signed the receipt did he notice the small slip of paper wrapped around his credit card. He glanced back up, but she was still hiding out in the kitchen, clearly waiting for him to leave before she came back out. Gathering his coat, Mike headed back out to the rental car and got behind the wheel before unfolding the note and reading what she had written.

*Boardwalk*

*3:00 PM*

### 3. Chapter 3

Ellen Walker pushed quickly through the swinging door leading into the kitchen, desperate to put a wall between her and the man sitting dumbfounded in the corner booth out in the dining room. She had sensed some spark of familiarity when their eyes first met as he took his place at the table, but she had done her best to suppress the feelings welling up in her chest. She had been wrong before, and come close to blowing the cover her father had worked so hard build for both of them. She had been watching him closely as she made her way around the dining room, doing anything to keep herself out there instead of hanging out in the kitchen like she usually did, and she had felt his eyes following her.

As he was finishing his meal, she had started to become desperate, trying to figure out how she would tell if the man sitting just feet away was the boy who she had loved so many years ago. Walking over to the table, she had been prepared to ask him his name outright, and breathed a sigh of relief when he pulled out a credit card. She would be able to read his name for herself from the safety of the counter, and figure out what to do from there. As she turned to go, her heart nearly stopped when she heard him whisper "Eleven?" It was a name not even her father spoke and that meant her past had finally caught up with her; the man at the table was either Mike or someone still loyal Papa. As she read the name, embossed in neat gold lettering across the face of the card, she had to stifle a sob, of joy or relief or lost years, she couldn't quite say. Whatever it was, she knew she had to take a few minutes to collect herself, and she still had a shift to finish out. Wrapping a quick note around the card, she dropped off his receipt and receded to the safety of the kitchen.

"Want to tell me what that was all about," teased Robert as he scrapped down the grill, after giving her the all-clear that her last customer had left.

"Shut up," she laughed. "He just reminded me of someone I grew up with. From back in Arizona," she added quickly, the invented back-story so well rehearsed after a decade that it rolled off the tongue like an absolute truth.

"Whatever. Better get back out there, Gladys and Frank are here, right on schedule," he said, nodding his head toward the elderly couple taking a seat in the booth they had occupied nearly everyday at 12:30 since anyone could remember. "Try not to fall in love with Frank while you're out there," he ribbed.

As she walked nervously back into the dining room, she chanced a glance out the front window into the parking lot, where she saw Mike Wheeler backing his rental car out into the street. Growing up, she had fallen in love with the bedtime stories her father had told her of sweet princesses being rescued by brave knights on horseback and whisked away to their happily ever after. "It may not be a noble steed," she thought, "but perhaps her knight had come for her all the same, in a rented black Ford Taurus."

Driving slowly through town, Mike was lost in a daze, trying to come to terms with what had just happened. After giving his arm a good pinch, just to make sure he wasn't dreaming, he couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry at where fate had finally delivered him. He had found her. He had actually found her. A million thoughts ran through his mind and he was nearly back to the highway before he realized he was running on autopilot. Turning around, he drove back to find a parking spot at the end of the boardwalk that ran most of the length of town.

The next two hours passed in a slow blur as he contemplated just what he would say to the girl he had loved, still loved. Did she still love him? Would she be happy to seem him after so long, or would she send him away, for fear of somehow attracting the attention of the very people she had been trying to escape? As the clock crept agonizingly around to 2:45, he couldn't wait any longer and left the car behind, walking out onto the boardwalk. It was an overcast afternoon and a fall chill hung in the air. Apart from one couple leaving a small art gallery halfway down the line of shops, he had the place all to himself. Leaning against the old railing, weathered and bleached by years of salt and sun, he stared out at the waves and tried to steady the pounding in his chest. Above the crashing surf and the cry of a circling gull, he almost didn't hear the bicycle rolling slowly toward the place where he stood.

"Mike?" a soft voice asked.

He turned and faced the girl standing beside a pale blue Schwinn, and he cursed himself for having not recognized her on first sight back in the restaurant. Sure, she was older, a little taller, her soft brown hair longer, but in that moment she somehow looked exactly as he remembered her that night as they said their final goodbyes. She looked just as she did the night she stepped into the Byers' living room, punked out and fresh from a demogorgon fight, or that very first time he laid eyes on her that night in the rain. Her deep brown eyes so full of life seemed to reach into his very soul.

"El? Is it really you?"

Dropping the bike to one side, she closed the remaining feet between them, moving faster with each step until she crashed into his waiting arms, burying her face deep in his neck. As they held tight to one another, the tears of relief flowed gently down their cheeks as twelve years of carefully contained anguish was allowed to let go at long last.

"I never thought I'd see you again," she finally said, lifting her head to study his face, still afraid this was all some terrible mistake.

"I told you, it wasn't goodbye forever," he smiled. "And I'm a man of my word."

At that she let out a soft giggle that melted his heart. It had been weeks after she had closed the gate once and for all that he'd first heard that sweet sound escape her lips and he had thought it was the greatest noise he ever heard. Standing on the boardwalk with the salty breeze gently tossing her hair, the laugh was now almost musical to his ears.

Finally breaking the embrace, she looked quickly around them, making sure they were still alone.

"Come on," she said, taking his hand. "We need to get home."

"Home?" he asked, seeing the guarded look fall back over her face as she picked up the bike and started pushing it along the walkway and out toward the street.

"It's only a couple blocks, too many eyes out here," she added, glancing about.

It was then he started to appreciate just a hint of what the last twelve years had been for her. Even now, in what should be one of her happiest moments, she was ever-vigilant for anyone taking too close an interest in the girl from the restaurant and the boy they had never seen before. After a quick two blocks, she led the way up the driveway of a tan, one-story house at the end of a dead-end cul-de-sac. Pulling a key from the pocket of her jeans, she unlocked the garage door and slid it open far enough walk her bike inside, before coming right back out and locking up again. Grabbing hold of his hand, she led the way to a side-door by the kitchen, and let them inside.

Only once the door was safely closed and locked behind them, did she throw her arms around him once more. Free to give vent to all she was feeling, she pressed her lips eagerly to his. After a moment of shocked hesitation, he melted into her embrace. Unsure of how they got there, they soon found themselves on the living room couch, still wrapped in each-other's arms, both feeling 14 again and remembering the last time they had been like this, on one of those rare occasions when Hopper had left them alone at the cabin together. There would be time enough to talk and fill in the gaps of all their time apart, but for now, they reveled on the comfort of the other's embrace and the connection they shared that always seemed to transcend words.

At long last, El glanced up at the clock.

"Shoot, dad will be home soon. I need to throw dinner in the oven."

As she stood up and started toward the kitchen, she looked back at Mike, sitting quite content on the couch. "Don't go anywhere," she teased.

Soon, but not soon enough, she was back, sitting by his side, her hands held gently in his own. "I still can't believe your really here," she said. "I dreamed of this moment so many times, but I was so afraid it would never come true."



"I know what you mean," he confessed. "Some days, the only thing that kept me going was the thought that, wherever you were, you were finally safe."

All too soon, their quiet reunion was broken up by the sound of an old pickup making its way down the block. El stood quickly, the barest look of childish guilt on her face, and straightened out her hair.

"Wait here, he usually comes in through the kitchen. I'll head him off there and break the good news."

She planted one more quick kiss on his lips before turning into the kitchen. Mike stood then, suddenly terrified to face the Chief again after all this time. The last time Hopper had kept El hidden away, Mike had thrown a few feeble punches at the man in anger and frustration. This time, all he felt was gratitude that he had kept his promise to keep her safe. As he stood waiting, Mike heard the kitchen door open, and then close again with a firm thud.

"Hi daddy, how was your afternoon?"

"Hi El, another greasy one. Dinner smells great," said a gruff, but warmly familiar voice.

"I..um.., I have a bit of a surprise," she said, the nerves obvious in her voice. "Out here in the living room," she added, her voice growing closer.

Hopper stepped around the corner into the living room, and Mike could see the color drain from the old man's face as his smile fell.

"Wheeler?"

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**AN: I just want to take a minute to thank everyone for the great feedback on the story so far. This is the first story I have published as I go, rather than having the full thing written before posting anything. It means a lot to me to know when a chapter connects with people and that gives me the boost to get the next chapter written.**

## 4. Chapter 4

Henry Walker, Hank to his friends, was a proud man. Not in ego or in arrogance, but in achievement. He had undertaken the daunting task of keeping safe his little girl, his most precious love in the world, from sinister forces who sought her for their own. When the time for action had come, he had gladly set aside all he had in the world to protect her, giving up his very identity in the end. For fourteen years, twelve of those on the run, he had schemed and sacrificed to give her the most stable life he could; and it had worked. When they arrived in Clear Brook ten years ago, the locals had been wary of the pair who kept mostly to themselves. They were soon won over by the story he told, of an abusive ex-wife and mother back in Arizona with rich, well connected relatives who swore they would take the back girl from him at any cost. In typical small-town fashion, they quickly took them in and swore an unspoken vow to watch over two; it was clear to anyone who cared to look the love the father held for his daughter.

All that remained of their old life, their true past, stayed locked safely away in a small box in the top of his closet; the few ties to the home they abandoned when danger came. A drivers license in the name of Jim Hopper, along with the badge he proudly wore as Chief of Police. His Colt Python, cleaned and ready should the day come when he needed to arm himself once more. The faded kindergarten photo of little Sara Hopper, the daughter he had been unable to save, who's death still haunted him in the quiet hours of the night. From a girl simply called Eleven, a birth certificate in the name of Jane Hopper that was supposed to be her ticket into a normal life. Lastly, tucked into the folded certificate sat a simple photograph of the girl at a school dance, arm in arm with the boy she loved, on a night they had thought marked the start of their forever.

Hank kept these things as a reminder of the promise he made to his daughter, Ellen, long ago. They would return to Hawkins one day, to the life they had left, when things were finally safe. He hadn't promised *soon*, a word he had discovered held hope of a quick resolution, but had only promised her *someday*. He meant it too; deep in his heart he intended to return her to the life she deserved, but

only when he was certain the danger was gone. Until that day came, he slept with one eye open and checked over his shoulder as he made his way through town each day.

That is why, as his daughter led him by the hand that night with the promise of a surprise, his face went deathly pale at the sight of their old life standing in his living room.

"Wheeler?" he asked again, his face turning quickly to El and back to Mike. "How did you find us?"

Already his mind was kicking into action, reviewing the escape plans they had devised as soon as they settled into Clear Brook. They each had a duffel-bag packed and ready with the essentials and an empty third to quickly pack the souvenirs of this life they couldn't bring themselves to leave behind. They had been through it before, back when they had been forced to flee South Carolina, and to this day he wasn't positive if they had been found or not. Still, he would rather run a thousand times, than for her to be caught just once.

It wasn't the fact that Mike had found them that had him worried. He knew Mike was the one person in the world he could trust completely to keep her secret safe. No, what had him worried was the idea that, if the boy had found them, who else might be close behind on their trail. With the question hanging in the air, El realized in all their excitement of seeing one another, she hadn't asked either and he hadn't volunteered.

Stunned by the old man's panicked reaction, Mike stood in silence until the question was repeated. "How did you find us?" he asked again, taking a step closer.

"I didn't," he answered, recovering his nerve. "I didn't know you were here."

Glancing out the front window, Hank took Mike and Ellen by the arm and herded everyone into the kitchen, out of sight to anyone who might drive down their street.

Grabbing a beer from the fridge, he turned back to Mike, the initial panic beginning to fade.

"Okay, help me understand. You didn't find us? So how is it you've come to be standing in my kitchen?"

Taking a deep breath, Mike started in. "I'm in town on a sales call. I'm supposed to be meeting with the couple running the Inn at the far end of town. When I got into town today, I was too early to check-in to my room, so I stopped for lunch at a restaurant overlooking the docks. And, when the waitress came over to take my order..." he trailed off, leaving the explanation unfinished.

Hank turned to his daughter then, expecting her to complete the thought.

"We recognized each-other," she finished. "Or at least we were pretty sure. Neither of us said anything out loud, nothing to give anything away," she added quickly, knowing his next fear all too well. Mike had been quiet and discrete when he called her Eleven, so there was no point in mentioning it.

"Alright," he finally said, breathing a sigh of relief. "Sorry to jump all over you like that, Mike. It's just, well, I think you can understand what a shock this is, seeing you all of a sudden like this."

"Believe me, the surprise was mutual," Mike laughed, glancing at El in time to see a shy blush tint her cheeks.

"Since we're not having to take to the road, how about some dinner? I'm starved and it smells delicious," he added, throwing El a smile he hoped made up for his initial panic.

As the trio settled at the small kitchen table, Mike couldn't help but feel somehow at home. He had joined them for dinner out at the cabin a few times, during those months of blissful ignorance before their entire world fell apart. Sitting with them now, things felt right again, like a huge missing piece of his life had been returned, which he supposed, it had.

"So you're the Walkers now?" Mike asked, desperately wanting to know all that had happened since they fled Hawkins, but knowing he couldn't push too hard for an explanation.

El looked at her dad with a sense of dread, knowing the terrible joke that was coming.

"Well, we couldn't call ourselves the Runners, so we had to be the Walkers instead," he said with a grin.

El buried her face in her hands. She had made the mistake of giggling at the joke the first time he told it, as they made their way across the country, trying to figure out where they would try to settle next. Since then, he had told it more times than she cared to count.

"I'm going by Henry now; Hank to my friends," he continued. Sensing the next question already forming in Mike's head, he added, "You can call me Hank as long as you don't make me regret it. And you're already acquainted with my daughter, Ellen. I suppose, if you need a nickname for her, she likes to go by El," he teased, eliciting another, deeper blush to her cheeks.

Getting more sentimental, as he watched his little girl staring hard at the boy she had been forced to leave behind, Hank went on. "It was the one thing from Hawkins she refused to give up, under any circumstance," he said, catching Mike's eye with a look of sincerity. "She's been Ellen, Elaine, and Leslie, a few others, but always something that made sense going by El. She said she could walk away from anything else, leave anything behind she had to, except the very first thing you gave her; a name."

"Dad," she said quickly, through red-tinged cheeks. As her eyes sheepishly found their way back to Mike's, she felt nothing but love radiating back.

Having done his fatherly duty of embarrassing his little girl just a bit, he moved the conversation on to Mike, inquiring what it was he did these days, and just what this sales call was he was in town for. Mike spent the rest of the meal answering his questions, assuring him there was nothing that would tie his current visit to their former life in Hawkins. El watched him, still hardly believing Mike was really here at long last, only partially catching his explanations but already more familiar with some aspects of his life than either of the men knew.

Finally, as dinner drew to a close and they carried their dishes up to

the sink, El announced, "Mike and I need to take a walk down to the beach." Her tone was serious, as was the stare she leveled at her father. Though he wanted to object, knowing that with Mike around, they had to be careful of just what people saw, he recognized the look of determination in her eyes. She didn't give him the look often, saving it for only the most important circumstances, but when she did, dishes and windows tended to wind up shattered if he pushed back with too much force.

"Alright," he agreed. "It's plenty dark, I think that's fine. It's getting cold out there, he can take one of my coats from the closet."

"And Mike is staying here tonight," she added, holding her gaze firmly on her dad. She could see the request filled him with apprehension, but after a moment of hesitation, he slowly nodded his head in agreement.

"He can have the couch," Hank offered, sending her back a look they had come to call *halfway-happy*. "You guys go on, I'll take care of dishes."

She smiled back a gratefully whispered "Thank you," as she took Mike's hand and led him to the hall-closet to get a coat and then headed out the front door.

"Sorry about that," she said, pulling him closer as they walked back down the quiet street toward town. "I just needed to talk to you without him around."

## 5. Chapter 5

As they walked arm in arm back toward town, Mike couldn't help but notice the nervous glances El cast at the homes they passed. He had spent years trying to picture what her life might be like. In all those times, he had envisioned a normal life for her: school, friends, a job; all the stability she deserved, and at first, it seemed as though he had been right. Now he could see, underlying whatever stability and happiness she had found, there was still the constant fear of the world catching up with them once more.

As they made their way down an old set of stairs off the boardwalk and onto the deserted beach, he could practically feel the tension melt away from her and ride away on the salty breeze. Away from prying eyes and illuminated by the glow of a half-moon peaking through a break in the clouds, they could have been a thousand miles away from the nearest living soul, and the contented smile on her face was the most relaxed he had seen her the entire day. He could also tell there were questions forming in her mind, things she wanted to ask but couldn't quite put to words yet, so for the moment they walked along the soft sand, her hand twined warmly through his.

"Sorry I dragged you out here in the cold," she apologized. "I just...I just needed you to myself for a few minutes. I know there's probably too much to even begin to say in one walk, but I just couldn't do this in front of dad."

"It's okay," Mike reassured her, "This has been an...unexpected day, to say the least. Certainly not what I expected when I got on the plane in Chicago this morning. But right now, there's nowhere else I'd rather be than right here with you."

He felt her fingers begin to fidget in his, as she readied her next question. She didn't want to ask, terrified of the answer, but she knew her whole world hinged on the answer. Hoping not to scare him with the loaded inquiry, she tried her best to nervously play it off as a joke.

"So. Will your girlfriend mind that you haven't called to let her know you made it to town safe?"

She ducked her head, afraid to meet his eyes, knowing her heart was ready to shatter into a million pieces if he confirmed her fears. He stopped, and held tight to her hand, turning her to face him.

"Are you asking if I'm involved with anyone back home?"

She raised her chin barely an inch before she dropped it again in a faint nod. Mike took his free hand and gently cradled her chin in his fingers, slowly raising her face until her gaze finally locked on his.

"No El," he said, with that same reassuring smile he used that day at the quarry, the first time he told her she wasn't a monster. "I don't have a girlfriend back home. Or a wife. Or a good friend I call when I get lonely. Late in high school, the guys kept trying to tell me I had to move on, and even tried roping me into a disastrous group date once, but there was never another who could compare to you. For the last twelve years, fourteen really, there's only been one person, one amazing girl who's captured my heart and held it tight."

As El stared back in amazement at his tender confession, two slender tears broke loose and rolled slowly down her cheeks, sparkling in the moonlight as they fell. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips; it was the answer she had been hoping for, and so much more. Of course, that opened a whole new set of problems, but she would take this one step at a time. Stretching out on tiptoes, she pressed a slow kiss to his lips.

"Come with me. There's something I need to show you," she said, taking hold of his hand and starting further down the beach, away from the last lights at the edge of town.

They walked in the powdery sand for several minutes in silence as Mike wrestled with the same question, now that she had opened that door.

"So, what about your boyfriend?" Mike asked, playfully nudging her shoulder with his own as they walked. "Is he going to be mad you're down here taking a romantic moonlit walk on the beach with someone else?"

The smile she threw him let Mike know she was equally unattached.



"The only man in my life is back at the house, probably sitting in his old recliner in the living room, terrified I'm down here doing something stupid."

Mike couldn't help but laugh at the image she had conjured and soon she was laughing right along with him. He may have changed his name, more than once, but deep inside Hank still beat the heart of Jim Hopper. As they recovered themselves, Mike realized they had turned away from the water and were approaching the base of a rocky cliff running a good distance down the coast. As they drew closer, he was startled by a sudden scraping noise, as he watched an enormous boulder slide to one side of the cave entrance it had been blocking. It took a few seconds before his brain started making sense of what he was seeing. He looked over at El is absolute awe; she had neither raised a hand or even broken stride as she walked toward the opening now laid bare.

"What?" El said, glancing over with a satisfied grin on her face. "A Jedi needs a place where she can train in the ways of the force."

If Mike had been startled before, he now stared dumbstruck. She went on, pleased with his reaction, "When we settled down for the first time, I made dad buy the whole trilogy, and now they're the first thing on my list to go into the emergency bag if we have to run. I'm sorry we never got to watch them together."

"Maybe now we can," Mike said hopefully.

"Maybe we can," she said with her own nervous smile.

As they reached the mouth of the cave, she gripped Mike's hand tighter and pulled him close. "It's not far, but it's darker than anything in here. Stay tight to me and I'll make sure you don't trip."

They walked only a minute or so, and Mike felt the sand give way to rock beneath his shoes. Finally, she stopped, and helped Mike feel for a log to sit down on. She sat beside him and he was about to ask what they were doing, when a small flame suddenly flickered to life in a carefully stacked fire-pit in front of them. As the fire took hold and the space around them gradually grew brighter, Mike looked around and was amazed by the sight. The small entrance of the cave

had given way to a large open cavern. At the back of the room, a spring of water poured out of a crack in the rock and cascaded musically down the face into a small pool before winding its way down to the sand, where it disappeared underground again.

Never moving from where she sat, El was carefully stacking a pile of driftwood in one corner that she had apparently collected and pulled along behind them as they walked. Several towers of rocks stood in another corner, delicately stacked in intricate patterns that he could only assume were placed without physical touch. On a shelf, roughly hewn into the rock, sat a single photograph in a simple brass frame and he recognized the snapshot immediately. It had been taken, reluctantly, by Hopper on Christmas morning, 1984, when Mike had brought El her present. The picture was of the two of them, still naive, hopeful children, arm in arm in front of the little tree Joyce had insisted he put up. El had refused to let that picture be tucked away in the lock box, and had a second copy, plus the original negative, tucked safely in the pages of her well-worn copy of *Anne of Green Gables*.

"El, this place is...I don't even know. Amazing," he finally decided.

"I told you," she said with a proud smile. "A Jedi needs a place to train."

Mike could tell by the look on her face, there was more to the story and she was doing her best to mask it with a little humor. He let her collect herself before she continued.

"Dad never tried to make me stop using my gifts. He said they were part of what made me who I am, so I should be proud of them. But he also said I had to be safe about it and never use them around people who didn't know, unless it was the very last thing to keep myself safe. It happened only once, a couple years after we left Hawkins; I had to use them in front of someone and so we had to go on the run again. He told me it wasn't my fault, that I did the right thing, but I always blamed myself for having to uproot his life again."

"When we came here, I found this place and have used it to practice. And." She paused and took a hesitant breath, "too reach out. To see you." she admitted.

Mike was so absorbed in what she was saying, the full gravity of her admission hadn't fully sunk in, so she continued.

"After the first few years, when it became obvious we wouldn't be going home, back to Hawkins, any time soon, and possibly not ever, dad started dropping not-so-subtle hints that I needed to let you move on. He let me send a couple more postcards before finally putting his foot down and saying it was time. That if I wanted you to be happy, I had to let you go. So I started sneaking down here in the middle of the night so I could reach out and find you; the fire and the waterfall did a good enough job to replace radio static. I just needed to see you and know you were alright. I'm sorry, I know that sounds really creepy but on my worst days, I needed to feel close to you because even if you were thousands of miles away, somehow you were still able to make it all better."

She looked back at Mike, embarrassed at the confession and afraid he would be mad she had cut off contact while still finding him for her own benefit. As her eyes met his, she was surprised to find them brimming with tears he had been fighting back since unfolding her note that afternoon.

"I missed you so much, El," he admitted, giving the tears permission to fall. "I wish I could have been there for you. Getting out of the truck, the night you left, is the one moment of my life I truly regret. I should have stood up to Hopper and refused to let him tear us apart."

Giving release to her own tears, she pulled him close and nestled her face down in his neck, breathing in his comforting scent that had somehow not changed in all this time. "You know he never would have let you come. He would have drug you out of the truck and probably not even let me send you the few cards that I did."

"Still, you never should have had to go through all that alone. Sitting back in Hawkins, all I could ever do was hope and pray that you were somewhere safe, and that you were happy; that you were having the normal life you completely deserve."

"I know you did. I can't tell you how many times I came to visit in the night, only to find your bed empty and you alone down in the basement in the place where you once built the blanket fort for me,

softly whispering your hopes out into the universe."

"You saw that?" Mike asked, a little embarrassed there had been an audience for his moments of quiet weakness.

"I saw. And it meant everything to me," El comforted, trying her best to alleviate his embarrassment and her own guilt for invading those private moments. "Your wishes came true for me too, really they did. It took a few false starts, and there has always been the fear of having to move on again, but dad and I have put together a good life here. He has always made sure we had a roof over our heads and enough to stay comfortable. He helped me learn all the things I should have during the years of school I missed and got me in to high school, helped me struggle my way through and actually graduate. He helped me figure out the world of friends."

She smiled, trying her best to assure him all had been happy for her, but she knew she couldn't give him only half the story. He had told her long ago that friends don't lie.

As her smile faded, Mike pulled El closer and asked, "What is it?"

"I made a few friends, but they could never replace you. No one could ever understand me like you could. Part of the problem was the mask I always had to wear around everyone else, never letting them know the real me. If they knew, we would have to move on. I could never tell people the real reason I'm afraid of swimming, or why seeing a soldier in uniform sends me into a panic attack."

Of course Mike knew the reasons behind those fears, and so many others. He couldn't help but picture a thousand simple moments something had likely triggered a terrible memory and she would have been torn between running away or suffering through the moment alone.

"During senior year, my English teacher looked so much like Papa, I actually thought it was him the first time I walked into class. It took everything I had to go to his class every day, and even then, I could barely concentrate. It got so bad I barely made it through with a C. Most days, I wound up crying alone in a bathroom stall after class, just trying to pull myself together again. The only thing that got me

through each day, was picturing the reassuring things you would say if you were there. You would remind me that Papa was gone, and you would promise me everything was going to be alright."

She looked back into his eyes, feeling a weight lifting from her shoulders having unburdened the thoughts that had been dragging her down.

"El..I don't know what to.." Mike stammered.

"I really missed you too," she said, leaning close and pressing her forehead to his.

For a long time, they sat in silence, wrapped in each-other's arms and watching the gentle flickering of the fire. Each was already deep in thought, planning just what they were going to do, now that they had been reunited. Finally, it was Mike who spoke.

"I don't know just how we're going to do it, but we're going to figure this out. I can't live my life without you in it."

"I can't lose you again, either," she returned, "but I don't know how we make this work. We don't even know anymore if anyone is out there looking for me."

"El, we'll find a way, and you're not going to lose me. I..."

She raised a finger to his lips, silencing the vow she knew was coming.

"I know what you're going to say Mike, and I know we're going to try. But please." She took a deep breath, fighting back the lump in her throat. "Please don't make a promise you're not sure you can keep."

"El." He looked deep in her eyes, willing her to feel the sincerity flowing through him. "You are not going to lose me. I promise."

## 6. Chapter 6

They sat there for a while longer, wrapped up in one another's arms and watched the small fire burn down to embers. Mike ran ideas through his mind, plans he had been contemplating from the day she first left, of just how they would make it all work. El sat cuddled up to Mike, pressed against his side and was surprised to realize she actually felt hopeful for the first time in years. She had been afraid to let him make the promise, knowing that if he couldn't keep it and she lost him again, that would somehow be worse than the loss itself. A promise from Mike Wheeler had been the first reliable feeling of security she had in her life and she couldn't bear the thought of that security being gone. Still, she had seen the determined look in his eyes when he promised, and somehow she knew once again, he was going to make everything alright.

Finally glancing down at her watch, El stood and, taking Mike's hand, pulled him up from the log.

"Time to head back. I wasn't kidding when I said dad would be sitting there worrying," she said with a laugh.

Grabbing an old coffee can, she scooped water from the little pool and doused the last of the flames, plunging the cavern into darkness. Mike stood where he was, knowing if he took a step in any direction, he was going to trip and break something. He never heard her approach, but he suddenly felt her presence the instant before her lips were on his, her hands running up his arms as he reached out and wrapped her in a firm embrace.

"We really do need to go," she sighed, breathlessly, as they pulled apart.

"Are you sure? You could always just pull that rock back across the opening and we could stay in here forever."

"Maybe we'll call that Plan B," she giggled. "Come on."

Holding tight to his hand, El guided them safely back out of the cave and onto the beach. What little moon had been peaking through the

clouds when they went in was now completely obscured, leaving the walk back to the boardwalk almost as dark as the cave had been. After retrieving Mike's rental car from where he had left it that afternoon, they made the short drive back to the house and tucked it out of sight in the spacious garage next to the house.

As soon as they walked into the house, it was clear El's assessment had been correct. Stepping into the kitchen, they immediately heard the creak of a chair just out of sight in the living room, as Hank stood to come and meet them.

"We're fine, dad," El called out, before he had even turned the corner.

"Oh, you're home," he said, trying to play off the timing of his trip to the fridge as a coincidence. "Did you have a good walk?"

"For someone who's spent the last decade keeping us hidden, you're still a terrible liar," she teased. "If you're going to pretend to come in here for a beer, at least put down the unopened one you're already holding."

He looked down at the can he had grabbed almost an hour ago and never bothered to start. "Sorry. You can't blame your old man for worrying about you."

"That's why I love you," she said, planting a quick kiss on his cheek before continuing into the living room with Mike in tow.

In the living room, Mike was surprised to see the couch had already been fixed up for him in their absence. He had been prepared to rough it for the night with just the old quilt that had been laying across the back, so the sheet tucked into the cushions, and the folded blanket and pillow sitting at one end were a welcome sight.

The three of them sat for a while longer, El and Hank peppering Mike with questions about Hawkins and the people they had been forced to leave behind. Only when Hank declared it bedtime, and reiterated his decree about who was sleeping where, did Mike realize just how tired he had gotten. His body was still on Chicago time and so, felt as though it were almost 2:30 in the morning. After a kiss goodnight at El's bedroom door, Mike went back to the couch and settled in to

sleep. As excited as he was, and in spite of all the joys and worries running through his head, he was out like a light in a matter of minutes.

He wasn't sure whether it was El, or the thunder, that woke him a few hours later. He opened his eyes to find her kneeling in front of the couch, her face close to his. A flash of lightning illuminated her face just long enough for Mike to register the panic painted there, and he was instantly wide awake.

"El, are you alright?" he asked, concern quickly mounting.

"Yeah, just..." she paused, flinching as another flash lit up the room, followed less than a second later by the accompanying rumble of thunder. "Can I just sit out here with you for a little bit?"

"Of course," he agreed, sitting up and scooting over to one end of the couch.

El sat down beside him, tucking her feet up to one side and nestling herself tight against his side. Mike put a reassuring arm around her shoulder, and gently took hold of her hands with his other.

"Thank you," she whispered, shuddering and pressing herself tighter to his side as another rumble shook the room.

"It's okay," he soothed, stroking her shoulder and running his hand softly down her back.

After a few minutes, she had fallen asleep again, curled warmly against him, though each rumble of thunder sent another involuntary shudder through her sleeping frame. Sitting there, trying his best to comfort her as she slept, Mike almost didn't notice Hank walk into the room.

"Had a feeling I'd find her out here," he said quietly, settling into his old recliner.

"I think the thunder had her spooked, and she came out here," Mike explained, trying to head off any accusation that they were sneaking around his rules.



"I know. She's never been able to sleep through a storm; not once. The first rumbles of thunder she's wide awake in a panic. I used to try reading to her, or rubbing her back to settle her back down, but that never did any good. So now, whenever a storm passes through, the tradition is mugs of hot chocolate and a few rounds gin-rummy until the thunder is done. I was worried after she didn't show up at my door when the lighting started."

Mike looked down at the girl sleeping peacefully against his chest, his protective arms around her keeping the latest rumble of thunder from reaching her subconscious.

"I really don't know how you do it," Hank said, staring in amazement. "Just being around you seems to put her mind at ease in a way nothing else can. Over the years, we've pieced together her fear of storms and traced it back to her first night out of the lab. Being locked away in the middle of that building, she had never even heard a storm before and all of a sudden she was stranded out in the middle of it. Not knowing what else to do, she was actually considering going back to the lab, and then you found her and took her home."

It was a memory that was forever burned into Mike's mind, turning around in the woods and finding her there, scared and alone, soaked to the bone in nothing but an over-sized yellow t-shirt.

"She told me how, after you got her settled in the basement that night, the storm raging outside still had her scared. All she wanted to do was run upstairs and find you, but she knew it was too dangerous; she could tell how big a risk you were taking by hiding her there. So that night, she decided that even though you were two floors away, you were still close enough to keep anything bad from happening to her. And that was the last night she slept through a thunder-storm, until tonight," he said, nodding toward El as she slept.

As she had settled deeper into sleep, El shifted and was now laying comfortably on her side, her head cradled in Mike's lap. Hank stood and walked over, laying the discarded blanket over her before turning back to Mike.

"I should have brought you along when we ran. I never realized just how much she needed you, and I'm sorry," he apologized.

"You were just doing what you thought was best, all to keep her safe. No one can fault you for that," Mike offered.

Hank nodded appreciatively and took a long, slow breath before saying, "Whatever you're planning, just be careful. Now that you two have found each-other again, she needs you. Please, don't hurt her."

Before Mike could respond, the old man turned and walked back to his room and gently closed the door. Looking down at the only girl he had ever loved, Mike gently stroked her hair and whispered, "I know what we have to do, El. I promise we'll be together."

**AN: I will go ahead and apologize if anything about this chapter doesn't make sense. I am fighting a cold and wrote this while on NyQuil so it is possible I might have missed putting down a detail that was in my head. I waited until I was between doses to edit, so hopefully I caught it all, but I just wanted to give a heads up in case this chapter felt a little off.**

## 7. Chapter 7

Waking up in his arms had been, perhaps, the single greatest moment in her life. By the steady rise and fall of his stomach, El could tell he was still fast asleep, so she chose to revel in his warm embrace for a few minutes longer. She had been thinking hard about what they were going to do, ever since the moment he threw his arms around her on the boardwalk.

"Was that really just yesterday afternoon?" she wondered.

In truth, she had been thinking about it for much longer, twelve years now, but she had always relegated the thoughts to that portion of the brain reserved for foolish hopes and dreams. Believing he could actually come back into her life had just hurt too much, so she had kept the thoughts at a safe distance. But now he was here; fate or the universe or God himself had brought them together, and she couldn't lose him, not again. Her father wasn't going to like what she had come up with, but she wasn't a child anymore and she had some say in what was going to happen.

"Good morning," Mike said, shaking her out of her moment of peace. She looked up to see his smiling face beaming down at her, and she decided maybe this now took first place for best moments.

He leaned forward, as she rolled to one side and raised up on an elbow, their lips meeting in the middle. Neither was quite sure how long they sat like that, but the moment was broken by the gruff clearing of a throat in the hallway.

"Good morning, don't mind me," Hank said as he made his way to the kitchen. "Just going to start on some breakfast."

Laughing through flushed cheeks, like teenagers caught doing something far more inappropriate, they shared one more kiss before getting up and heading to the kitchen themselves. While Hank started a pot of coffee, El pulled a carton of eggs from the fridge, and a fresh box of Eggos from the freezer.

"Do you want to toast or scramble?" she asked, turning to Mike.

"Unless you want eggs that are burnt, but also still runny somehow, probably better leave me on toaster duty."

El laughed, handing Mike the familiar yellow box. As they cooked and sat down to eat, the trio kept the conversation light. None of them were ready to face the looming questions they had to answer. Finally, with a deep breath, it was El who got the ball rolling.

"I've given this a lot of thought," she started, "and I think I want to go back to Chicago with Mike."

A shocked smile spread across Mike's face. He was overjoyed that she wanted to be in his life so badly she was willing to pick up and move away from the place that had been home for the last decade. Still, an apprehension quickly followed, knowing what an enormous risk she would be taking if she came. A crestfallen look washed over Hank's face. It was exactly what he had been expecting, but that didn't take away any of the sting. El looked from one man to the other, waiting for one to speak.

"You're not my little girl any more, you're an adult now, so it's your decision," Hank started, swallowing a lump in his throat. "But I have to tell you, I think you'd be taking a huge chance in going back so close to home."

El appreciated that he wasn't trying to talk her out of it, or outright telling her no, so she looked expectantly at Mike.

"Actually," Mike began, slowly, "I don't think you should come back with me."

The look of hurt and betrayal that fell over her was instantaneous. Had she misread everything that had happened in the last day? Did he not really want her in his life? She could feel the tears starting to sting at the corners of her eyes and she fought hard to hold them back.

Reaching out and taking her hand in his, Mike continued. "El, that's not what I meant. I want to be with you more than anything. All I meant is that I don't think Chicago would be safe for you. I'm almost positive the lab, or whoever they are now, are still keeping tabs on

me. It doesn't happen as much as it used to, but there will still be days when I pick up on weird clicks in the phone line during a call, or people on the street trying really hard not to look like they are watching me. It's never been a secret that going through me would be a potential route for them to find you."

El felt a little better hearing that, knowing Mike's hesitation had nothing to do with not wanting her around, and everything to do with protecting her like he had always tried to do. It also made her feel better that the fears she and her father had lived with for the last twelve years hadn't been for nothing; the people who had been looking for her then, were still looking for her now.

"So what do we do, then?" she asked, anxious to know what Mike's plan might be.

"I've been thinking, what if I moved out here?" he offered.

This time it was Hank who threw out an immediate objection. "If you're really being watched, it's not going to take them long to figure out what's going wrong when Mike Wheeler suddenly packs up and moves from Chicago out to some nowhere town on the Washington coast."

"What if Mike Wheeler wasn't the one who moved out here?" Mike asked, catching both of them off guard.

They stared back in hopeful curiosity, wondering just where he was going with the idea.

"I've been planning for twelve years just what I would do if I ever found you again. I knew there may only be one shot to get it right, so when the moment came, I would be ready."

For the next fifteen minutes, Mike laid out his plans and careful preparations. El sat transfixed at the amount of thought he had put into it all; where she had pushed plans into the world of wishful thinking, Mike had been planning things out as an inevitable eventuality. Even Hank had to admit, once the explanations were complete, that it was a good idea that presented very little risk.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked, reminding Mike that it would mean giving up all contact to family and friends and anything else about his current life.

"I'm more sure of this than anything," Mike countered. "I already don't see much of the family anymore. Mom, Dad and Holly are down in Tennessee, and that's only for a couple more years until she goes off to college, then they already have plans to move to New Mexico. Nancy's out in New York. As for the guys, they're all over the map too. Other than that, work was the only thing tying me to Chicago and I am more than willing to walk away from that."

As fast as the breakfast dishes could be washed and put away, the plans were settled and Mike was ready to put everything into action. A quick shower and change of clothes, and he was ready to hit the road. El walked with him to the garage and pulled him into a tight embrace, afraid that if she let him go, he might somehow slip away from her forever.

"I promise, I will be back in a few days. And this time, it's for good. Enjoy it now, because you'll never be rid of me again after that."

She couldn't help but give a small laugh and she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

"I love you Mike," she said, kissing him just one more time before he could get in the car.

"I love you too, El. I really do."

As Mike pulled onto the highway and started back to the airport, he switched his mind to the task at hand and started running through everything he had to do in the next few days. While he waited to board his flight back to Chicago, he placed a quick call to the Pacific View Inn to tell them he regretted the inconvenience, but he would be unable to make the meeting he had planned with them tomorrow. Back home in his small apartment, Mike pulled out the two suitcases he kept stashed in the closet, ready for just this occasion. He quickly packed the clothing he planned to take, along with a few personal effects he couldn't leave behind. Tucked carefully in among those was Mike's own copy of the photo taken at the Snow Ball so many years

before. As he looked around, Mike was surprised to realize how little he actually cared to take with him. He had spent many years now living a very simple existence, far below the kind of money he had actually been making. The belongings that wouldn't fit into the suitcases would be dealt with by his landlord in a month or two when his rent went past-due.

As he sat the kitchen table, picking at a frozen TV dinner, Mike set to work erasing his laptop. He wanted to be sure no trace of Mike Wheeler remained on the machine since he was bringing it along. As the computer hummed away, re-installing software from the original factory disks, Mike finished a few more housekeeping details in his plan. Opening his wallet, he took out everything but the cash, drivers license and credit card, dropping the rest into the trash. His library card, voter's registration and a half-finished coffee shop punch-card all dropped into the bin, erasing just a little bit more of his old life. Pulling out two sheets of blank paper, Mike wrote a couple final notes to people who needed to know at least part of what was going on.

*Nancy,*

*The thing we always discussed has happened. I'm going forward with what we planned. Please help Mom, Dad and Holly to understand. In case this really is goodbye for good, I just want to thank you for being an amazing big sister. There's no way I would have gotten through this without you. Be happy for me. Be happy for us.*

*I love you,*

*Mike*

He read over it again and knew no matter how much he put, it would never be enough to tell Nancy just how much her help had meant to him. The next note was easier, as it was only a pointer to a more detailed letter he had written several years before.

*Craig,*

*I know this isn't going to make much sense, but I have to disappear. In my top desk drawer, there is a longer letter of explanation, as well as the necessary legal documents, signed and dated, handing over my 50%, giving you full ownership and control of the company. I want to assure you, this is something to do with my personal life, and has nothing to do with the company. I really can't thank you enough for your years of*

*friendship and I regret that I can't do this in person, but time is of the essence right now.*

*Mike Wheeler*

Satisfied with his final correspondence, Mike took the time to empty anything perishable out of the fridge and cupboards and hauled out the garbage for one last time. His landlord had always been friendly, and the last thing he wanted to do was leave too big a mess to be dealt with when he skipped town. Finally, exhausted, Mike collapsed into his bed for the last time. How many nights had he lay awake, wondering where she was and praying she was safe? Now he knew exactly where she was, and he was counting the seconds until he could get back to her. He forced himself to put the thoughts aside, knowing he needed a good night's sleep; he had a very long day or two ahead, depending on how his flights stacked up.

Waking early the next morning, Mike checked he had everything packed and gave the apartment a final walk-through. Locking up on his way out, he took a moment to stuff the key back under the door where the landlord would find it when he finally entered the apartment. Stopping by the office before anyone was in, Mike signed and dated the documents signing over his stake in the company he had helped to build, placing them carefully back in his desk drawer where he had indicated they would be. While most people would hesitate at signing over that kind of money, Mike knew something much more valuable was awaiting him. After locking up the office, Mike tucked Craig's note, along with his office key, in an envelope and dropped them back through the mail slot where they would be found a few hours later. In the building's lobby, Mike dropped Nancy's note into the outgoing mail slot, and headed for the airport.

Phase two of his escape plan had to be carefully orchestrated. He would have liked a few more hops for safety, but he needed to be gone right away. After checking the envelope he had tucked in the outer pocket of his carry-on bag, Mike walked up to the ticket counter and purchased a round-trip ticket to Atlanta, Georgia, knowing full well he wouldn't be making use of the ticket home. A few hours later, after collecting his bags from the luggage carousel, Mike found a quiet corner to swap a few things around in his wallet. The driver's license and credit card were tucked away in an envelope



in the lining of his bag, the only remnant of Mike Wheeler that would be coming with him. In their place, he tucked a fake id and a thin stack of cash needed for his next jump.

Jake Erickson zipped his bags shut again and, tucking the wallet into his back pocket, stepped onto the escalator leading back up to ticketing. Picking a new airline at random, he bought a one-way ticket up the coast to Newark, New Jersey, opting for another busy airport where he could blend into the crowds. After four hours, one mechanical delay and a slice of something the airline claimed was lasagna, Jake collected his suitcases from baggage claim, and went through the routine again. Selecting another license from the carefully packed envelope and refreshing the stack of cash, Charlie Baker headed for ticketing again. On the way, he dropped Jake's license, ticket stub and luggage tags into one of the many garbage cans he passed. Soon enough, he was seated in the passenger lounge, waiting for his flight to Denver, Colorado.

Another flight and another poor excuse for a meal later, Charlie sat in the dim corridors of the Denver airport. It had been a long day, and though he would be able to buy a ticket tonight, it would be tomorrow morning before he was able to fly out. While a night on the hard-plastic seats wasn't ideal, anything that brought him closer to El was worth the neck cramps. After throwing away Charlie Baker's id, he reached into the envelope and pulled out the final set of identification. Mark Anderson slipped his Michigan drivers license into his wallet, along with the brand new Visa sitting beside it in the envelope. It was an identity crafted much more carefully than Jake or Charlie had been, and it had started many years before.

While Mike Wheeler was finishing up the senior year of his Computer Science degree, Mark Anderson had been attending evening classes across town working on the Accounting major Mike Wheeler hadn't found challenging enough. A few years later, while Mike Wheeler was quickly growing a promising software business, Mark quietly received his diploma, which was carefully tucked away, should it be needed someday. Alongside the diploma were a social security card and birth certificate, both valid and registered in the proper systems. While Mike Wheeler had earned a healthy salary as his software business took off, he had spent only the bare minimum on necessities

and sent the rest of the money off-shore to the Caribbean; if it was good enough for Wall Street bigwigs to hide their fortunes, it was good enough for him. After sending the money through a second account, it was brought back into the country in an account in Mark Anderson's name, slowly building interest until it was needed.

After a seemingly endless night of tossing and turning on the airport benches, Mark was pretty sure he would have slept better on the floor of El's cave. Still, he reminded himself, it was all going to be worth it. One final flight and he was back in Washington, barely 48 hours since he had last flown out. Taking a taxi from the airport, Mark's first stop was a used car lot he had scoped out on his way out of town two days earlier. After picking out a modest silver four-door without too many miles, he surprised the salesman when he paid cash for the vehicle, laying down the \$100 bills one at a time. When the time came to fill out the licensing paperwork, Mark slid an additional \$100 bill to the salesman.

"I'll fill out the rest, sign and date it right now. How about I call you in a day or two with the address and you can fill that in."

Eyeing Mark suspiciously before pocketing the bribe, he nodded. "I can delay the paperwork a few days. If I don't hear from you by then, I have to rip all this up and report the car stolen. You understand, right?"

"Of course," Mark nodded. "A few days should be more than enough."

Keys in hand, Mark headed for the coast. Next step was a place to live. He agreed with Hank that Clear Brook was too small of a town to just show up in. Fortunately, about 10 minutes south along the coast was the city of Ocean Shores. With a population of 6000 people, it was a sprawling metropolis compared to tiny Clear Brook. By dinner time that night, Mark had secured a one-bedroom apartment just a few blocks off the beach and a job, on a trial basis, with a small office in town that handled bookkeeping and payroll for several of the hotels and restaurants in town.

Exhausted and in need of a good meal, Mark knew there was only one place to go. Driving the short stretch up the coast, he couldn't help but wonder just how many times he would be driving the route

in the years to come. Parking in the quiet gravel lot, Mark locked his car and walked inside, passing the "Please Seat Yourself" sign and settling into a familiar corner booth overlooking the docks. His back was to the waitress as she approached his booth.

"Coffee?" she asked, a hint of sadness in her voice.

"Please," he said with a smile. "And how about a club sandwich," he said, looking up and watching the smile spread across her beautiful face. "My friend says they're her favorite here."

**A/N: And so we come to the end of our tale. When this idea first came to me, I was only envisioning a one, or maybe two chapter story. Thankfully, it blossomed into more than that, but my arc was always to get them back to their life together. I won't write off the idea of a sequel, if a proper story comes to me, but I don't have anything right now. I also can't promise anything, as it is only a few small ideas so far, but I am kicking around thoughts of a prequel of El and Hopper's early years on the run.**

**I'd just like to say a huge thanks to everyone who has left reviews and/or PMs for this story. They really do mean a great deal to me and help pull me through moments of writer's-block.**